focus on women

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Women and the Media

By Margaret Gallagher

"For full eight years I was the only woman on the reporting staff of the great national daily (*The Times of India*). When I was expecting my first baby and wanted to take maternity leave I was told the rule books had to be consulted for the *Times* had no tradition of maternity leave."

Usha Rai, *The Times of India*, 28 October 1988

"The world's war zones today are chock-a-block with would-be Kate Adie's risking their lives for minor stations in the hope of landing the big story because they know that what the major networks want is a front line account from a (preferably pretty) woman in a flakjacket."

Peter Millar, *The Times* (of London), 21 August 1992

Usha Rai joined *The Times of India* in the 1960s. Today over 20 per cent of journalists on the *Times* are women. The female reporter is no longer an oddity. In most countries it is now considered unnecessary, or inappropriate, to "protect" women journalists from the crime beat or from night duty. On the contrary, even war zones are no longer forbidden territory to women media professionals. Britain's Kate Adie is just one of many celebrated female journalists seen regularly on television screens around the world, filing courageous stories from the most dangerous trouble spots on earth. Yet the London *Times* suggests that the media somehow manipulate these women. According to this view, the "female personality reporter" — like the female newsreader and the female presenter — is part of a deliberately thought-out media strategy to attract viewers and readers. Whether this is true or not, it is an indisputable fact that almost everywhere women's share of media jobs has increased steadily over the past two decades, and that female senior executives are not uncommon. But despite these advances, however competent they are, however ready to "risk their lives" in the pursuit of their profession, women working in the media may still be reduced to the status of "a (preferably pretty) woman in a flakjacket". Even today women media professionals are likely to be judged in a quite different way from their male peers.

Of course, this tendency to apply different criteria to women and men permeates media content itself. After 25 years of research into gender portrayal on television in the United States, the Cultural Indicators at the Annenberg School of Communication, University of Pennsylvania, concluded in 1994 that the world depicted by television "seems to be frozen in a time-warp of obsolete and damaging representations ... A child growing up with children's major network television will see about 123 characters each Saturday morning, but rarely, if ever, a role model of a mature female as leader." In the world as seen through the lens of the media, social and occupational roles are almost completely divided along gender lines. When women appear at all — and numerous studies around the world document their dramatic underrepresentation in almost all kinds of media content — they tend to be depicted within the home and are rarely portrayed as rational, active or decisive. Of course there are exceptions. But they remain exceptions. The evidence is overwhelming, whatever part of the world one looks at. The most extensive cross-national study so far, spanning 25 television channels in 10 European countries, found that from one country to another there are

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"few grounds for optimism. Instead we come across the same dreary litany, an endless repetition of the same statistics, tinged with despair". But why does all this matter?

In overall terms women are much less visible in the media than men are.

Why the Media Matter

The mass media occupy an increasingly central place in the lives of women and men all over the world. If North America, Western Europe and some of the affluent Asian and Arab States still lead in terms of media availability, the global picture is changing fast. Between 1970 and 1991 the developing regions increased their share of world radio sets from 16 per cent to 36 per cent, and their share of world television sets from 8 per cent to 29 per cent, the fastest growth rates being in Africa, the Arab States and Asia.

In many countries of the Caribbean, Latin America and the Pacific, ownership of radio and television sets is already well above the world average. The electronic media are sweeping aside the barriers of illiteracy which have traditionally excluded vast populations from access to information and entertainment via the printed word. People now spend at least 4 hours a day watching television in — for example — the USA, Japan and Portugal. In other countries daily viewing averages of between 2 and 4 hours are common.

The media are well placed to influence our opinions and attitudes — about ourselves, our relationships, our place in the world. But what we see and hear in the media is a selection — reflecting particular priorities and views of the world. That selection — and its presentation in specific media output — reproduces certain assumptions about women's role and status.

Women are enthusiastic media users and their media preferences are different from those of men. A recent UNESCO study of television viewing patterns found an identical pattern across all nine countries surveyed. Women in Australia, Bulgaria, Hungary, India, Italy, Korea, the Netherlands, the Philippines and Sweden spend on average 12 times as much time watching television as men. And while men prefer sports, action-oriented programmes and information (especially news), women prefer popular drama, music/dance and other entertainment programmes. This pattern of preferences mirrors the way in which women and men are portrayed in various kinds of media: each sex tends to favour media content which gives visibility to their own gender — either in terms of the characters presented or in terms of the issues highlighted.

However, in overall terms women are much less visible in the media than men are. Not surprisingly then, research shows that many women are not satisfied with what the media offer. A 1994 study in the United Kingdom showed that although women feel ambivalent about the concept of "women's issues" — fearing that this kind of labelling will lead to marginalization — there is also a shared understanding among women about issues which do concern them, and a feeling that these are not given priority in the news media. As one woman put it, "Women's issues don't always get enough airtime on the so-called serious programmes. They don't have the same weight as world politics, which they should do, because they are about changing society in fundamental ways."

Most of the women interviewed in this study also said they would like to see more women journalists on television, and more female experts, because these would "act as significant role models for other women, stimulate female interest in public issues, and — perhaps — sometimes speak in the interests of and for women." As these women clearly recognize, access to the media bestows power. Those who produce media content can decide what information and images appear in the media, and also how these are presented. But how easy is it for women to reach these positions?

The Media Employment Gap

UNESCO data show that women have pursued higher-level mass communication education in increasing numbers over the past 15 years. Almost everywhere the percentage of women studying in this area is on the rise.

Women in the Media: A Sampling of Success Stories

Eugenia Apostal (Phillipines) Founder and Publisher *Philippine Daily Enquirer* (1985-1993), launched as an alternative to the government-controlled press of the 1980s and now one of the top circulation dailies in the Philippines

Charlotte Beers (United States) Since 1992 Chairperson and Chief Executive Officer Ogilvie & Mather Worldwide, one of the world's largest advertising agencies; also first woman to chair the American Association of Advertising Agencies (in 1988)

Leyla Beketova (Kazakhstan) In 1994 became President of the Kazakstan Radio and Television Corporation, the country's newly created national broadcasting network

Razia Bhatti (Pakistan) Chief Executive Newsline Publications and Editor *Newsline* since its launch in 1989; the award-winning *Newsline* is one of Pakistan's leading news magazines and is among the few journalist-run publications in South Asia

Danièle Boni Claverie (Côte d'Ivoire) Has held several top-level posts in the media, including that of Director-General of the national television organization, TV-Ivoirienne (1987-1990), and since 1993 has been her country's Minister of Communication

Tina Brown (United Kingdom) In 1992 became Editor of *The New Yorker*, one of America's most prestigious magazines, and also the first magazine editor to receive the National Press Foundation's Editor of the Year award

Man-Yee Cheung (Hong Kong) Director-General Radio Television Hong Kong since 1986, was the first woman to become President of the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association (1988-1992)

Anne Deveson (Australia) Executive Director Australian Film, Television and Radio School (1985-1989), was the first woman to be appointed to this position; since 1991 she has chaired Australia's National Working Party on Portrayal of Women in Media

Miriam Feliman (Chile) Director-General and General Manager Radio Nacional since 1991, is one of the most highly placed women in broadcasting management in Latin America

Ernestina Herrera de Noble (Argentina) Since 1969 Director *El Clarin*, Argentina's largest circulation daily, is one of several women now running major newspapers in Latin America

Flor Hurtado (Mexico) Director-General Canal 11 since 1994, runs Mexico's most important cultural television channel

Jean Kaoka Kalisilira (Zambia) Acting Editor-In-Chief Zambia News Agency since 1994, is the highest-ranking woman in news agency management in Southern Africa

Janet Karim (Malawi) Since 1993 Director and Editor-In-Chief *The Independent*, Malawi's first independent newspaper, published bi-weekly

Sandra Knowles (Bahamas) General Manager Broadcasting Corporation of the Bahamas since 1993, is one of several women now heading broadcasting services in the Caribbean

Gwen Lister (Namibia) Editor *The Namibian*, one of Namibia's most influential dailies, which she launched in 1985; also Chairperson Media Institute of Southern Africa, founded in 1992 to promote a free and pluralistic press in Southern Africa

Monica Miller (Samoa) President Pacific Islands News Association since 1991, is the first woman to head PINA — the largest professional media body in the Pacific region

Pilar Miro (Spain) Director General Radio Televisión Española (1986-1989) and award-winning film director, was the first woman to head a major broadcasting organization in western Europe

Jane Moilanen (Finland) Managing Director Liikemainonta-McCann (McCann-Erikson Worldwide-Finland) since 1995, is among the highest ranking women in European advertising

Christine Ockrent (France) Since 1994 Editorial Director *L'Express*, one of France's most significant weekly news magazines, while continuing a highly successful career in television journalism

Joan Pennefeather (Canada) Chairperson National Film Board of Canada since 1989, heads one of Canada's most important communication agencies, which has done much to promote women's access to the media

Ana Maria Romero de Campero (Bolivia) Since 1989 Editor-In-Chief *Presencia*, one of Bolivia's most influential dailies; so far her country's only female Minister of Information (in 1979), she is also Vice President International Federation of Daily and Periodical Publications

Lucie Salhany (United States) Chairperson Fox Broadcasting Company 1993-1994, was the first woman to rise to the highest echelon of broadcast management in the United States

Batatu Tafa (Botswana) Deputy Director Broadcasting Radio Botswana since 1990, is one of the most highly placed women in broadcast management in the African continent

Beverley Wakem (New Zealand) Director-General Radio New Zealand (1984-1991), maintains the record of highest-ranking woman in broadcasting management in New Zealand and was the first female President of the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union 1989-1991)

Nancy Woodhull (United States) Founding Editor *USA Today* (Circulation almost 2 million) and its first Managing Editor, was until 1990 President Gannett News Services, one of America's largest news organizations

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Data covering 81 countries show that in 50 of these more than 50 per cent of journalism and communication students are female. Yet women are still a minority presence within media organizations — whether radio and television or the printed press.

Real power within the media remains largely a male monopoly. Women's share of top jobs in the media is still disproportionately small.

Studies conducted in 1993-1994 in selected countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America show that in no country does women's share of media jobs reach 50 per cent. Indeed, in the majority of cases outside Europe it is well below 30 per cent. The proportion of women finding employment in the mass media is by no means commensurate with their training.

A six-country study coordinated by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC) notes that in all of these countries there is a gap between the number of women who receive communication training and the number working in the media. Studies in the United States and the Netherlands have shown that female journalism graduates are less likely than their male counterparts to find work in journalism.

Of those women who are hired by media organizations, most are actually to be found in administrative jobs rather than in the production and editorial posts usually associated with the creation and development of media output. In almost every country studied in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America, more than 50 per cent of all female media workers are to be found in administration and service jobs. And within the administrative hierarchy, women tend to be concentrated in low-level secretarial and junior management posts.

On the other hand, women are almost invisible in the technical area — where many jobs are highly skilled and highly paid, sometimes leading to careers in programme production or to the senior management echelons. Averaging 8 per cent across the European countries, 5 per cent in Africa and 4 per cent in Latin America, women's poor representation in technical jobs in the media is often attributed to lack of relevant training.

However, this is not the whole story. European research shows that the number of women recruited to the technical area is disproportionately low, even when they have the necessary formal qualifications.

At the heart of the media lie the editorial and production jobs most directly concerned with the creation of media output. Print journalism offers comparatively good prospects to women, especially in Latin America. Across the six countries studied women are 28 per cent of reporters and "standard" journalists, 29 per cent of correspondents, 36 per cent of sub-editors, 24 per cent of editors, and 21 per cent of bureau chiefs, directors and executive editors. By contrast, there are no women in the bureau chief category in any of the African countries, Japan or Malaysia; in India (across three major dailies) there is just one. In radio and television production there is considerable gender segregation, with women tending to be concentrated in occupations (announcers, presenters, production assistants) which — even if sometimes well-paid — may not lead to onward career development.

However, in most of the countries studied women do have reasonable access to the producer role — 33 per cent in Europe, 34 per cent in Africa, 41 per cent in Latin America. In Malaysia 36 per cent of producers are women, and in Indian television the figure is 30 per cent — an extremely high proportion in relation to women's overall share of television jobs (15 per cent). The nature of the producer's role varies considerably from one organization to another, but in many cases it does carry considerable influence. However, among the most influential production executives — heads of department, programme controllers — women's share of posts drops to 16 per cent across the organizations in Latin America, 15 per cent in Europe, 12 per cent in Africa, and 4 per cent in India, while there are no women at all at this level in Japan, Malaysia, Malawi, Namibia or Swaziland.

Real power within the media remains largely a male monopoly. Out of more than 200 organizations studied in 30 countries across four regions, only 7 are

headed by women; a further 7 have female deputy directors. Most of these are small radio companies or news magazines. In fact women's share of top jobs in the media is still disproportionately small. For example, analysis of the European broadcasting data shows that men are seven times more likely than women to reach the highest positions. As in other fields of employment, the media open their doors more readily to women in the middle echelons than at the very top: the "glass ceiling" is extremely difficult to crack.

Today, although blatant discriminatory practices have generally been abolished, women's access to media power continues to be hindered by a series of "invisible barriers" — attitudes, working conditions, work assignments and so on — which can impede career development in subtle ways. For instance, media organizations generally subscribe to legislative requirements governing equal pay. But ILO data stretching back to 1985 demonstrate a notable earnings gap between female and male journalists — a gap which is actually widening in countries as diverse as Australia, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the Republic of Korea and Singapore, and which is not explained by any difference in the hours worked by these women and men.

The explanation must be sought in more subjective factors such as the relative bargaining power of female and male journalists, the perceived value of their work, and their access to various kinds of assignment.

Women in Media: Making a Difference

Women must still struggle to achieve recognition and respect as media professionals. But the struggle is a crucial one. For the assumption that media content will change for the better if more women are involved in its production has been an integral part of the debate surrounding gender portrayal in the media over the past twenty years. Links between women's employment in the media and changes in the nature of media output are notoriously difficult to demonstrate, and some studies have concluded that female and male media professionals do not necessarily differ in their approaches to stories or issues. Without dwelling on the many reasons why it is difficult for women to change long-established media practices and routines, it is worth noting the comment of Kay Mills, veteran American journalist: "A story conference changes when half the participants are female ... There is indeed security in numbers. Women become more willing to speak up in page-one meetings about a story they know concerns many readers."

The importance of "critical mass" is paramount. Women are still far from being "half the participants" in the media, particularly in key editorial areas. But clearly the numbers are growing — and not just among "rank and file" employees. There is no doubt that in the past few years women have begun to break through to the very top ranks of media organizations, to an extent which would have been unimaginable just a decade ago. And evidence is beginning to emerge that —when they constitute a reasonable numerical force — women can and do make a difference, even in the hallowed area of news. For instance, a 1992 survey of managing editors of the 100 largest daily newspapers in the USA found that 84 per cent of responding editors agreed that women have made a difference — both in defining the news and in expanding the range of topics considered newsworthy: women's health, family and child care, sexual harassment and discrimination, rape and battering, homeless mothers, quality of life and other social issues.

The introduction of "new topics" (although of course they are age-old concerns for women) is one way in which women media professionals can make a difference. Another is to change the way in which established issues are covered. To illustrate this, let us return to the world's war zones. It was in one of these — in the former Yugoslavia — that women journalists succeeded in focusing world attention on the systematic rape of women as a weapon of war. Penny Marshall was one of the first British journalists to investigate conditions in the camps at Omarska and Trnopolje — before the issue of mass rape became public. Her remarks are revealing:

As soon as I saw the men (in the camps), partly because of their physical appearance, I wanted to know if they had been tortured. It didn't strike me that

the women's story was as urgent as the men's, and I think that is because I had inherited a news agenda that has subsequently changed. It has occurred to me since that the next generation of reporters may well put rape on the agenda much higher, and much earlier in the war, *because of this experience* (emphasis added).

Women do "inherit" agendas within the media. But they can also change those agendas, to reflect more adequately the preoccupations and priorities of all women. That is why the media matter.

Margaret Gallagher, who has written extensively on media and gender issues, is a consultant to the Department of Public Information and Statistical Division of the United Nations Secretariat, for preparation of the second issue of *The World's Women: Trends and Statistics*.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of the United Nations.

Women's Employment in the Media: 1993-1994
Percentage of female staff in radio, television and the press

	Radio/TV	Press
AFRICA		
Botswana	46.5[1]	32.6[2]
Lesotho	39.5	35.0[3]
Malawi	11.4	17.2
Mozambique	16.3[4]	—
Namibia	25.0	46.6
Swaziland	29.8	28.4
Tanzania	—	19.0
Zambia	25.2	21.0
Zimbabwe	22.3	18.6
LATIN AMERICA		
Chile	23.0	24.8
Colombia	32.0[5]	30.4
Ecuador	25.4	31.7
Mexico	23.5	19.4
Peru	29.0[6]	15.3
Venezuela	24.1	27.4
EUROPE[7]		
Belgium	31.3	21.5
Denmark	42.6	28.9
France	36.6	—
Germany	38.8[7]	3.0
Greece	36.3	—
Ireland	32.7	—
Italy	30.1	21.0
Luxembourg	28.6[5]	37.1
Netherlands	32.8	31.9
Portugal	34.1	20.3
Spain	30.2	25.7
United Kingdom	39.8	24.7
ASIA		
India	12.2[8]	7.9
Japan	9.0	6.8[9]
Malaysia	27.7	25.5

Source: Data based on studies for the Statistical Division of the United Nations Secretariat

[1] Ministry of Information and Broadcasting: includes Radio Botswana, Daily News, Botswana Press Agency, there is no television in Botswana
[2] Weekly press only; see note 1
[3] Lesotho Weekly only; there is no daily press in Lesotho
[4] Radio only
[5] TV only
[6] Radio/TV data for 1990. Press data only permanent staff
[7] Former Federal Republic only
[8] Includes All India Radio (total staff) and Doordarshan TV (headquarters and 7 production centres only)
[9] Excludes temporary staff

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